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ABSTRACT

In this paper, observations made by the authors while attending the Second World Festival of Black and African Art and Culture (FESTAC '77) are discussed in terms of their implications for black mental health. The presence and effects of the "Black Aesthetic" are described as they were manifested by the Festival participants. Particularly emphasized is the affective aspect of the Aesthetic, which is defined as having five dimensions: depth of feeling, naturalistic attitudes, style, communicative proclivities, and physical responsiveness to affective stimuli. It is held that the principal role that guidance and counseling must play is to project positive black African cultural images on the psychic screen of black people's minds, so as to effect healthy self concept and identity. Suggestions are offered for presenting positive African cultural images in educational settings in order to contribute to the intellectual and affective developments of black Americans. (GC)

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FESTAC '77: Implications for Culture in Counseling

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FESTAC '77: Implications for Culture in Counseling

The Second World Festival of Black and African Art and Culture (FESTAC) which began in Lagos, Nigeria on January 14, 1977, brought together the largest concourse of Black people ever to assemble in any one place at any one time. The participants came from sixty-five (65) nations of the world representing a kaleidoscope of art and culture, all stemming from a common cultural source--Africa.

The aims of the festival were:

1. To ensure the revival, resurgence, propagation, and promotion of Black and African culture and Black and African cultural values and civilization;
2. to present Black and African culture in its highest and widest conception;
3. to bring diverse contributions of Black and African people to the universal currents of thought and art;
4. to promote Black and African artists, performers and writers and to facilitate their world acceptance and their access to world outlets;
5. to promote better international understanding;
6. to facilitate a periodic "return to origin" in Africa by Black artists, writers, and performers uprooted to other continents.

The festival featured various forms of dance, music, drama, films, graphic arts and crafts, literature and colloquia. The categories of dance included ritual, ceremonial, masquerade, birth, child naming, marriage, initiation, chieftancy, acrobatic, vocational (i.e., hunters, farmers, etc.), traditional Afro-American, Caribbean, Australian and contemporary dance theatre.
Similar to the dance events, the remaining arts exhibited and the colloquia were presented by categories of usage which reflects the utilitarianism of African art.

FESTAC'S Affective Character

A cursory review of FESTAC '77 would probably suggest that this cultural event was a manifestation of intellectual, physical and social phenomena, exclusively.

However, an ontological inspection would remind us that there is a third component of human cultural reflected here. Man is an intellectual, physical, and affective being. In fact, feeling is with us early and it is manifested earlier than even the intellect. It is a primary level of existence; and what relationship it has to thought, to the structure and content of total behavior, is most difficult to assess. One can with assurance, however, assert that affect is most relevant to the status of the healthy functioning of a people.

More to the point, FESTAC '77 was an occasion for the presentation of affecting objects and events. These objects and events which represent cultural works and happenings resulting from Black Affective Behavior, are essential to the understanding and facilitation of healthy Black functioning. It is important that the reader understands that these affective objects and events are not accidental, simply decorative odds and ends, or amusing irrevelancies; rather, they are purposely concerned with potency, emotions, values, and states of being or experience. Furthermore, they are slef-contained actions which, once committed, are self-perpetuating and asserting. In the presence of these affecting objects and events one experiences their powers, as they form the bases for the excitation of ones own affect. Hopefully it is now understood that these acts are most relevant, most critical, and most profound in their significance to an understanding of Black behavior.

The Black Aesthetic

Toldson's and Pasteur's (1976) treatise on the Black Aesthetic served as a framework for understanding and utilizing the affecting objects and events accruing from the feelings of Black people. Drawing upon anthropological methods of inquiry, (observing activities, categories of acts, objects or persons forming the centers of attention of groups, individuals representing status categories, dyads, and settings [whiting and whiting, 1977]); the writers sought to document the presence and effects of the Black Aesthetic among the participants attending

FESTAC '77. Whereas, the data gathering techniques, (filming, photographing, interviewing, direct observation, and the assembling of affecting artifacts) were anthropological, the primary goal was to translate into modern psychological terms and constructs the five (5) dimensions postulated in the theory of the Black Aesthetic.

The Black Aesthetic is defined as an energy source of life force characterized by feeling or Black Affective Behavior. It appears to grow out of a reverence for that which is natural in the universe. It is expressed creatively and artistically through a "close to nature stance" relative to life in general. At FESTAC '77 this impressive phenomena was expressed through the activities of the Black contingents from each of the sixty-five (65) participating countries. The Black Aesthetic was epitomized through the expressive objects and events presented at the gathering. These culturally nurtured behaviors, often ignored by social scientists and mocked by the dominant society, served as affective vehicles, in culturally approved ways, for the assertion of values, both individually and culturally.

Additionally, these Black affective behaviors asserted: didacticism, delight, release of tension, and cultural vitality. More importantly, the affecting objects and events, deriving their impetus from Black feelings, permitted the objectification and display of the value position operative in the Black world--a close to nature stance.

The five (5) dimensions of the Black Aesthetic as suggested by the writers are: Depth of Feeling, Naturalistic Attitudes, Style, Communicative Proclivities, and Physical Responsiveness to Affective Stimuli. The dimensions were observed and recorded throughout the festival.

1. Depth of Feeling--The special ability of Black people to feel deeply was readily recognizable. There existed a fraternity with a quality of

reverence, rarely, if ever, experienced in the world community of Black people. One could see an abundance of genuine physical contact (embracing, hand-holding, and even kissing--all without sexual overtones and without regard for gender) exhibited between and among the persons in the FESTAC contingents. One was further impressed with the degree of friendly, social expressions, ranging from sincere smiles to spasmodic laughter. Yet, at the other end of the continuum, one could see the open and honest expression of disagreements, accompanied sometimes by intense anger; pleasantly though, these arguments never led to assaultive behaviors. On many occasions the disagreeing parties were observed, later, to be enjoying renewed affection toward one another. This seems to represent a striking contrast to the handling of conflict situations by individuals in our own society.

2. Naturalistic Attitudes--Naturalistic attitudes flow from a free acceptance of nature and self, which permits the acceptance of others. These attitudes were revealed in the open-mindedness displayed by the participants regarding others (no class consciousness), the free acceptance of the participants' diverse physical characteristics (including hair texture, color, facial features) and common human drives (including those that sustain life and express sensuality). These attitudes were further evidenced in such simple manners as relaxed postures, uninhibited walks, non-pretensious voice tones in conversation, and the ability to be comfortable with the natural scents of the human body. On this latter point, the reader would be in error to conclude that this connotes the acceptance of uncleanliness. Rather, the writers are suggesting that bodily scents which we in the western world cover with sweet, artificial odors, such as perfumes and deodorants, are accepted as natural consequences of being human.

3. Style--The event of FESTAC was the embodiment of style! The participants from each of the sixty-four (64) nations in attendance brought with them creativity, imagination, and spontaneity, revealed in their works of art, costumes and ideosyncratic behaviors.
4. Language and Communicative Proclivities--Inspite of the many languages spoken among the FESTAC participants, some common characteristics were denoted. The creating of images, rhymes, humoral emphases, poetic qualities, ironic juxtaposition of words, and gestures to accompany vernacular, and the use of natural environmental sounds as substitutes for words, were evidenced in every language spoken, giving a net effect of emotional vitality wedded with cognitive activity. This permitted direct and intelligent communication between us, based on a shared reality, awareness, and understanding of our common experience of oppression.
5. Physical Responsiveness to Affective Stimuli--Cultures of African people are highly action oriented. The action orientation embodies the concept of rhythm. This concept of rhythm characterizes the proclivity of Blacks for movement. At FESTAC '77, it was as if the cyclic--rhythmic patterns of the universe had been transformed to human flesh. Fluid rhythmic movement was seen in dance, walk, work, ceremony, athletic activity, and other kinesthetic behaviors throughout Festac Village, as well as the Nigerian Community visited.

Perhaps the most profound observation recorded at the Festival was that the use of the Black Aesthetics wedded sensuous feelings with intellect. This gave the participants a sense of liberation from the anxiety which is often characteristic of total use of the linear sensing modality. The use of the aesthetics seemed to have abolished compulsion among the group, and placed them in a state of moral and physical freedom. It appeared to have harmonized their feeling capacities with

their capacities for reasoning. The use of the aesthetics ridded the intellect of its usual compulsions, and reconciled it with the yearnings of the emoting senses. The writers were struck by this observation and began immediately to discuss the implications of FESTAC '77 to counseling.

The Assertion of Cultural Identity: A Requisite for Optimal Mental Health

The principal role for guidance to play is to project positive Black African cultural images on the psychic screen of the minds of Black people, so as to effect healthy self concepts and identities. People and culture are inseparable. Culture is the aggregate of concepts and values which characterize a community. It then follows that a people with a lowered appreciation of their culture are in themselves not in full existence. The human psychic minus the enrichment of ancestral thought and ideas, invested in cultural elements, is susceptible to identity conflicts, and lowered esteem; usually manifested in behavior that is not rooted in meaning and purpose. Hence, a lack of direction or mis-direction is likely to be evident in the life style of a people where the institutions responsible for developing their behavior have not celebrated their cultural images. Cultural images are central to man's self-definition. The image making penchant is observable in most societies. Western education, particularly, has projected white cultural images (real and created) on the whole of the universe, which as reshaped certain aspects of black reality. That is, Blacks perceive themselves through white people's projections of who Black people are vis-a-vis white people's projection of themselves.

Black Africa considers culture as part of an all important program of projecting the Black African personality, and the treasure it has contributed to human civilization. African leaders and intellectuals have with varying degrees of intensity, via FESTAC, given form and shape to the natural outburst of Africa's cultural activity.

Western education, with the preponderance of African descendants as recipients, must cease dismissing the necessity for ethnic education on the bases that, "we are all human beings" while choosing only to honor the European ethos as the appropriate imagery for human consciousness development. It is recognized, biologically, that all human beings belong to the same super-family of man, but what identifies the African and his descendants as a sub-family of man is the totality of his learned behavior patterns which expresses itself in economic, social organization, and in interpersonal relationships, as well as in the psycho-spiritual content of his life and being. Healthy self-concepts in Blacks cannot be optimally achieved and maintained without the formation of a strong cultural identity and the means for continually asserting that identity. Aime Cesaire, in his Return to My Native Land, said that, before the Black man can move forward, he must accept and celebrate that which he has for so long rejected-himself, his African roots, and those qualities of himself that white people have caricaturized. Toldson and Pasteur (1976) in their article on the stages of Black consciousness development via group guidance practices, formulated a therapeutic, theoretical statement, complimented by counseling techniques, using Aime Cesaire's work as a philosophical foundation. The article fashioned a counseling model capable of cultivating the Africanized personality and therefore, is capable of advancing the mental health status of Black people.

The effective projection of Africa's cultural images will not only restore dignity and high levels of Black consciousness to the Black race, but will serve to bring to light as the architects of FESTAC intended, the diverse contributions of Black African people to the universal current of thought.

FESTAC Experiences for Guidance Practices

The over-riding aim of these practices ought to lead to the appreciation and celebration of the Black African experience. The appreciation of African imagery

is essential to self-acceptance and self-understanding for Black people wherever we are. Among young Black Americans, it is yet commonly observed that scenes of Africa elicit laughter and other derisive reactions. Such behavior illustrates the success of the larger society's attempt to depict the African experience as deserving of mockery and source of embarrassment to its descendents and the rest of the world.

The writers observed at FESTAC images which initiated extensive deliberation on our part. The images reflected comradery, sincere brotherhood, mutual respect and reverance between Black males and Black females, peaceful resolutions of conflicts, pride in cultural attire and costumes, pride in natural beauty (most often reflected in natural hair styles and grooming), an absolute acceptance of richly pigmented skin tones, and a high regard and affinity for work which is creative and celebrative, and vital for human maintenance. These reflections are too infrequently available to developing Black youth entrusted to our direction and care. Often they get very few or none of these highly positive images. Educational institutions must become vanguards in the display of such images in the Black community. In that these images are so intricately connected with healthy self-concept development and optimal mental health, it appears imperative that the counseling program should provide for these needs of Black youth. The number and range of exercises stemming from the FESTAC experience are endless. Perhaps a few general ideas will serve to stimulate the readers further exploration. Recommended experiences include:

1. Micro-African Festivals (these could take the form of assembly programs, class activities, or special school days).
2. Making functional use of Black models from the entire world (relate models to careers, value positions and perspectives, and achievements).

3. Selective scrutiny with students of television programs, movies, theatrical productions, and audio-recordings, where Blacks from around the world are portrayed.

4. Invite African guests visiting the local community to speak and/or demonstrate aspects of their cultural heritage.

5. Small group work with students utilizing role-playing and simulation of African models of behavior that are vital to the personal development of the students. These may be designed to bring about the acceptance of varying skin colors and physical features, peaceful conflict resolution, respect for members of opposite sex, and a respect for creative and useful works.

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